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A people at war with no home

Refugees flood border as Viet offensive takes hold

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SITE SIX, Cambodia — Hobbling and straining on their battered crutches, the young Cambodian rebel fighters came into the center of this, their final border relief camp inside Cambodia, on Thursday for a handful of rice, a few dried fish and some medicine to ease their pain.

Every one of them was missing a leg.

Nearby, Heng Nal, a 20-year-old peasant who has spent more than a quarter of his life in ramshackle camps such as Site Six, chopped away with a crude hoe, digging deeper into the ground outside his thatched bamboo lean-to.

"I am making a bunker," he said through a translator, sweating under a blazing sun that comes each year with the dry season on the Thai-Cambodian border. "It is for when the Vietnamese shells find us again."

These were images of the destruction and despair last week inside the last civilian relief camp on Cambodian soil in the wake of the recent Vietnamese border offensive against the Cambodian resistance — the biggest military push westward by Vietnamese artillery and combat troops since Vietnam invaded and occupied Cambodia in 1978.

Along this troubled border 150 miles east of Bangkok the scattered sounds of a distant artillery round or

a machine-gun burst could be heard. But most of the destruction already had been done in the last three months when Vietnam turned its Soviet-made artillery on 17 Cambodian resistance camps scattered along the Thai border.

Dozens of rebel soldiers and civilians have been killed. Nearly 800 others have been seriously wounded by shrapnel, machine-gun bullets and thousands of mines that litter the 500-mile border dividing Thailand and Cambodia.

Far more significant, though, the Vietnamese have emptied every civilian resistance camp inside Cambodia except Site Six — itself a fall-back

evacuation position built hurriedly in November when a more permanent camp deeper inside Cambodia was overrun.

And as camps such as Site Six have fallen one by one, Vietnam's military operation also has flooded Thailand with more than 240,000 refugees in the last three months — more than 50,000 of them in the last two weeks.

Taken together, it is the largest single mass exodus since a famine and the bloody regime of former Cambodian ruler Pol Pot combined to send nearly half a million Cambodians to Thailand in search of rice, medicine and the hope of permanent sanctuary in 1979.

International relief workers and Western military analysts warn that the Vietnamese may not pull their troops from the border when the rains come in April, as they have after each of their annual dry-season offensives.

Thai intelligence officers on the border last week and recent U.S. satellite photos have indicated that the Vietnamese are building access roads and permanent military encampments to support their new border positions and to prevent the Cambodian resistance fighters from returning to their former strongholds inside Cambodia.

In interviews with relief officials, Thai military officers and dozens of refugees during visits to five emergency refugee camps on the border last week, it was evident that many of the Cambodians want only to return to a homeland free of foreign troops.

Refugees said they were ready to give up — that they want desperately to leave the border area for resettlement in the West and that some have been killed trying.

But, in most case, the recent wave of refugees is, as one relief worker said last week, "a problem with no solution." Many of the refugees have been buffeted and battered by a decade of political unrest that is the legacy of the Vietnam War. Now they are trapped along a narrow, 40-mile stretch of land between two nations.

"The Vietnamese certainly have shown no signs of leaving Cambodia, and on the Thai side, the policy is

clear — when the Khmers (Cambodians) are threatened, they will be allowed to come inside Thailand only for temporary sanctuary," said David Morton, a senior official of the U.N. Border Relief Organization, which has spent more than \$30 million a year to feed, clothe and care for the Cambodian refugees since the first exodus in 1979.

"But the Thais have got a real headache on their hands now. If the Vietnamese do not pull back, they are left with a new population of 240,000 homeless people in a country of already limited resources."

Hundreds of young volunteers from 14 international relief agencies, six of them U.S.-based, have been helping the Cambodians settle into about half a dozen evacuation sites set up in Thai territory after the heavy Vietnamese shelling began in November.

The Thais have allowed the refugees to erect huts with bamboo poles and thatched roofing supplied by the United Nations. The U.N. also has provided rations of drinking water, rice, cooking oil and fish, as well as emergency clinics and tens of thousands of rain tarps.

But the refugees are forbidden from chopping down trees for firewood, digging wells and from stepping foot outside the evacuation camps, which are heavily guarded by Thai commando troops.

Morton and many relief workers said the Thai government was most concerned about the camps' environmental impact on nearby Thai villages and towns.

Thai officials said they have noticed a drop in the region's water table and an increase in crime near the refugee sites.

"Anything that rings of permanence is strictly taboo," said one European relief official who asked not to be identified.

"For the time being," the relief official said, "it looks like the Vietnamese are staying put on the Cambodian side and the refugees are going to be forced to stay on the Thai side. But sooner or later, the Thais will get fed up with that. The Thais

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don't want to resettle these people. And, frankly, all these third countries that have been taking in Cambodians in the years since the famine and Pol Pot are getting fed up with them."

One official at the office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Bangkok last week called the situation "compassion fatigue — the feeling that you can only feel sorry for so long."

Since 1979, more than 180,000 of 200,000 Cambodian refugees have been permanently resettled in the West — about 120,000 of those in the United States, according to UNHCR statistics.

At the height of that exodus in 1980, the Thai government officially closed its border, saying that only those refugees who had arrived before February of that year would be allowed to stay at resettlement camps where the refugees were being screened for resettlement in the West. The rest were either returned to Cambodia or placed in Thai detention camps.

Now, the Vietnamese offensive is driving more Cambodians into Thailand. But the governments of the United States, Australia and other resettlement nations have declared that they cannot take in any more of them.

"Just when we thought the problem of the Cambodian refugees was nearly solved, though, the whole border caved in on us," said one refugee official in Bangkok.

In the last few weeks, hundreds of the most recent refugees have been trying to escape from the emergency evacuation sites and sneak into the one permanent resettlement camp remaining in Thailand, a sprawling complex of bamboo and thatch called Khao I Dang.

Several refugees and relief workers said many of the refugees have tried to bribe Thai military guards at the Khao I Dang camp under the false hope that entry into the resettlement camp would guarantee them permanent citizenship in America or another nation of safe refuge.

The problem is starkest at Ban Phu, an emergency evacuation site set up adjacent to Khao I Dang.

Thou-Thon, a former language teacher at Ban Phu, said that about 100 of refugees had tried to escape to Khao I Dang. He added that most of the refugees have since learned that Khao I Dang offers little hope of escape from the border than Ban Phu.

"Some of our people do want to leave, but most of us want only to go back to Cambodia," said Thou-Thon, 44, who said he left his village in 1975 to escape the "horror" of Pol Pot and, four years later, fled to the border to

escape the Vietnamese occupation.

Like most of the refugee leaders interviewed last week, Thou-Thon said that the latest Vietnamese offensive has weakened the Cambodian resistance, but he said that the fighters' morale was high and that they could fight a prolonged guerrilla war. Thou-Thon and other refugees in the evacuation camps support either Cambodian Prince Norodom Sihanouk or former Prime Minister Son Sann.

The guerrillas, supported and armed by China, are nominally united as the coalition government of Democratic Kampuchea (Cambodia), which holds the country's seat in the United Nations. Its president is Prince Sihanouk, the deposed Cambodian head of state of the 1960s, who commands an estimated 9,000-member guerrilla force.

The two other members of the coalition are the Khmer People's National Liberation Front, headed by Son Sann, with an estimated 16,000 troops, and the communist Khmer Rouge, with 35,000 to 40,000 guerrillas, the best-armed, best-trained and most experienced of the three factions. The Khmer Rouge is headed by Pol Pot, who has not surfaced publicly since the Vietnamese invasion ended his regime.

The Vietnamese, backed by the Soviet Union, have an estimated 160,000 to 180,000 men in Cambodia, supplemented by two divisions from Vietnam for the current offensive. The Vietnamese-installed government in Phnom Penh, headed by Heng Samrin, has an estimated 30,000 troops.

United as they might be in their goal to throw out the Vietnamese and Heng Samrin, the resistance groups are not united in other ways. Members of the resistance groups remain separate from each other even in the civilian border camps.

At the Khao Ta Ngoc camp in Thailand — the latest refugee evacuation site, — the refugees clung to the teachings of rigid communism laid down by Pol Pot when he drove out the U.S.-backed government in 1975.

"We still like Pol Pot," said Kera Rin, who was a ranking official in Pol Pot's regime. "We just wish he would return because he makes us strong — stronger than those against communism."

At another camp 50 miles north, this one a non-communist resistance camp, the leader said "all Cambodians have had enough of communism." But he conceded that the non-communist resistance fighters also appear to be tired of the fight.

"It is true that our military is our biggest weakness now," said Ngeth Sophon, leader of the camp called Site One and a former lawyer in the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh

who said 29 members of his family members were killed during Pol Pot's regime.

"It is hard to feel optimism now. The war has changed forever it seems," he said. "It is a guerrilla war now, and no one can win a guerrilla war on military strength alone."

"But, with the Vietnamese occupying all our lands now, it will make us stronger," he added. "And it is we, the civilian Khmer people, who are fighting the hardest struggle. As long as we sit in our little, bamboo shelters on this border, the Vietnamese will know there are hundreds of thousands of Khmer people still willing to suffer to get their country back."